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Information Bulletin No. ID-2003-140

To: District Managers  
Attn: Field Office Managers

From: State Director

Subject: Review of Draft National Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Sage-Grouse Habitat  
Conservation Strategy DD: 08/18/2003

The Draft National BLM Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy (Strategy) is available for review and comment by the Idaho BLM districts and field offices. This Strategy is the subject of two recently issued Washington Office (WO) Directives, [Information Bulletin No. 2003-109](#) and [Instruction Memorandum No. 2003-209](#).

Earlier this year, WO alerted BLM stakeholders and other interested parties that BLM would be developing the Strategy to address potential effects of activities conducted or authorized by BLM on sage-grouse and their habitat. The Strategy has been coordinated with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies so that BLM actions will complement ongoing sage-grouse conservation planning efforts led by State agencies. The Draft National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy became available to the public on July 21, 2003 through the BLM national website ([www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)).

Please review the Strategy. An interdisciplinary review is needed since almost all programs may affect sage-grouse habitat. Key disciplines in Idaho include wildlife, fire, range, recreation, and realty. Each District should consolidate responses for their respective administrative units into a single response. Comments must be submitted to the Idaho State Office (ISO) electronically as a MS Word document (attn: Signe Sather-Blair, Wildlife Program Lead – ISO 931) no later than August 18, 2003.

You are encouraged to provide interested publics a copy of the draft Strategy and attached briefing materials. Public comments will be received through August 20, 2003. A Question and Answers document and a one-page summary update of the Strategy effort have been attached for use by the ISO and field offices. A PowerPoint presentation is also available for your use as part

of the briefing materials and is located at <http://web.blm.gov/internal/wo-200/wo-230/Pages/sagegrouse.htm>.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Signe Sather-Blair at (208) 373-3827.

Signed  
K Lynn Bennett

Authenticated  
Caureen Miller  
Staff Assistant, 930

Attachments

- 1 - Question and Answer (7 pp)
- 2 - Summary Update (1 p)

## **BLM National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy**

### **Questions & Answers**

(7/10/03)

#### **Why is the sage-grouse (both the greater sage-grouse and the Gunnison sage-grouse) important to our environment?**

The sage-grouse is an icon of the American West. It is an indicator species for the sagebrush landscapes that make up their habitat. In healthy ecosystems, thriving populations of desired native species such as sage-grouse are a reflection of properly functioning natural processes that maintain diverse plant and animal communities. A decline in populations of indicator species over an extended period usually indicates a deterioration of landscape and ecosystem conditions.

#### **What are the threats to sage-grouse populations?**

One of the largest threats is from increasing human population. The population in the 11 western states swelled from less than 20 million people in 1950 to more than 60 million in 2000, placing ever increasing demands on the land and its resources. By 2025, the population is expected to increase to almost 85 million people.

All wildlife needs four basic habitat elements: food, water, shelter and space. Anything that negatively affects these requirements will, in time, also negatively affect wildlife. Sage-grouse habitat has been lost to wildfire and to croplands and livestock pastures, roads and housing developments, energy development and transmission activities, water diversion and other actions. Invasive plant species, livestock grazing, drought, and other land treatments have changed habitat. Cheatgrass, an exotic annual grass that first appeared in the mid- to late-1800s and is now classified as an invasive species, has altered natural fire patterns so radically that vast areas of sagebrush have been burned, and remaining sagebrush is vulnerable to additional cheatgrass-fueled wildfires.

#### **Why is the BLM developing a Strategy for conserving sage-grouse habitat on BLM-administered public land?**

A Bureau-wide sage-grouse habitat conservation strategy will help the BLM meet its responsibilities under both the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the Endangered Species Act. Population declines of sage-grouse across their range have been so significant in recent decades that seven petitions were filed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from early 1999 through March 2003 to protect sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act. Some of these petitions are for range-wide protection for sage-grouse, and there is as yet no habitat conservation strategy that spans their entire range.

The BLM is a strong partner in state and local sage-grouse conservation planning efforts. The BLM manages more sage-grouse habitat than any other entity—over 30 million acres, which makes up the majority of the remaining habitat. The BLM can help strengthen state and local planning efforts by 1) addressing sage-grouse habitat conservation needs on a broader geographic scale than is possible in individual state and local plans and 2) ensuring that consistent BLM policy is in place that addresses sage-grouse habitat conservation on BLM-administered public lands across sage-grouse range.

Sage-grouse are clearly a species of concern, due to their declining population trends and attendant Endangered Species Act petitions. Although sage-grouse are not listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, the BLM treats Bureau sensitive species as if they are Candidate Species for listing. The BLM Special Status Species Management manual specifies “the protection provided by the policy for candidate species shall be used as the minimum level of protection for BLM sensitive species” (section 6840.06E). Regarding candidate species, the manual specifies “... the BLM shall implement management plans that conserve candidate species and their habitats and shall ensure that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by the BLM do not contribute to the need for the species to become listed” (section 6840.06C).

The BLM Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy will specify actions necessary to support consistent management and conservation of sage-grouse habitat wherever there is BLM-administered public land that can support sage-grouse populations.

### **What is the proposed Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy?**

The BLM Strategy identifies a course of action for BLM to achieve sage-grouse habitat conservation. The Strategy identifies a series of goals and tasks that provide background and introductory information and a foundation for addressing habitat conservation concerns. It describes how the program will be implemented, who will do the tasks, and how progress will be tracked.

The BLM Strategy consists of two tiers. The first is a national-level Strategy that supports development of the second tier, made up of state-level BLM strategies.

### **What is the planned completion and publication date for the Strategy?**

The national-level Strategy will be completed by September 30, 2003. State-level strategies should be completed by September 30, 2004.

### **What is the timeline for actions identified in the Strategy?**

The Strategy will include the time frame for implementation, tasks and associated responsibilities.

- Immediate tasks are to be accomplished within six months from the date of Strategy approval,

- Short-term tasks are to be accomplished within two years from the date of Strategy approval.
- Long-term tasks are to be accomplished no later than 2008.

### **Why does the BLM need to develop this Strategy and what is it intended to accomplish?**

The BLM manages 261 million acres of public lands, most of which are in 11 western states. Its land management plans have focused on multiple uses across large areas. Because of this broad focus, cumulative impacts of seemingly unrelated management activities may have negatively affected some widely distributed or wide-ranging wildlife species, such as sage-grouse. By considering sage-grouse needs on a broader geographic scale, management coordination will be significantly improved and the benefit of conservation actions maximized. The Strategy lays out a coordinated course of action that will enable the BLM to meaningfully contribute to the conservation of sage-grouse and help avert the need to list sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

The Strategy describes the:

1. overall status and trends of sage-grouse populations and sagebrush habitats,
2. urgency for action to conserve sage-grouse,
3. significance of BLM-administered public land to sage-grouse conservation, and
4. opportunities and benefits of conserving sage-grouse versus consequences of failing to meet conservation needs.

Expectations for implementing the Strategy will be described in the Strategy.

### **How does this Strategy relate to adaptive management?**

Development of a Bureau-wide strategy is actually a form of adaptive management, which until now has been applied primarily at the land use plan level in response to local monitoring of management situations. This Strategy represents the revised approach necessary to address conservation concerns on an inclusive regional scale.

The process starts with an overall review of the existing situation by looking at administrative mechanisms and program policies and directions to determine how they affect sage-grouse habitat conservation, and then recommending appropriate changes. At the field level, species needs were often considered only within local land use plan boundaries during planning processes and subsequent management actions. As a result, many actions that seemed reasonable at the local scale and were supported by BLM policy and program guidance have contributed incrementally to cumulative loss and degradation of habitats on a broader geographic scale.

For the BLM to successfully conserve sage-grouse habitat, it must first adapt its approach to consider conservation needs and management impacts on a broader landscape scale, then step

that information down to local management levels. This Strategy is a significant step in that direction.

**Why is the completion of a Bureau-wide Strategy for sage-grouse habitat conservation important?**

As of March 2003, seven petitions for Endangered Species Act listing of sage-grouse have been filed, effectively blanketing the entire range of sage-grouse across an 11-state area. The BLM must immediately identify actions it will take to ensure that sage-grouse have the habitat resources they need to maintain and increase populations so they do not need to be listed under the ESA. Though many BLM programs and activities may be affected by actions necessary to conserve sage-grouse habitat, the impact to these programs will be far greater if the sage-grouse is listed as threatened or endangered.

**What are some possible actions the BLM will take regarding conservation of sage-grouse habitat?**

The BLM will develop best-management practices for authorized uses and management activities on BLM-administered public lands and will ensure that sage-grouse conservation is addressed in all levels of land use planning. Programs and activities that may be affected in land use plans would include, but not be limited to:

- livestock grazing;
- wildfire management;
- land-use planning, all levels;
- recreation use;
- oil and gas exploration and development;
- regional assessments and monitoring;
- identification and development of partnership opportunities;
- development of regional implementation partnerships;
- development of a consistent philosophy for developing partnerships.

**Will the Strategy still be useful if sage-grouse are listed under the ESA?**

Yes. When species are listed, recovery plans are prepared to improve habitat conditions and increase populations. If sage-grouse were to be listed, the Strategy would serve a valuable role in recovery planning because it is being developed with consideration of both the Endangered Species Act listing factors and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Policy for Evaluating Conservation Efforts (PECE).

## **What are the Endangered Species Act listing factors?**

The three primary ESA listing factors of concern to BLM public land management, which are under BLM control to some degree, are:

1. the present or threatened destruction, modification or curtailment of the species' habitat or range;
2. the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms (such as, having sufficient conservation measures specified in land management plans); and
3. other natural or manmade factors affecting the species' survival (such as, the role of invasive plants and/or wildfires in modifying habitat suitability).

## **What is the Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE)?**

The final Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts was published in the *Federal Register* March 18, 2003, and became effective April 28, 2003. It identifies criteria to be used in determining whether proposed conservation efforts are likely to contribute to improving the habitat and species survival, thereby making a T&E federal listing unnecessary. The policy applies to conservation efforts identified in conservation agreements, conservation plans, management plans, or similar documents developed by federal agencies, state and local governments, Tribal governments, businesses, organizations and individuals.

The PECE establishes two basic criteria:

1. the certainty that the conservation efforts will be implemented, and
2. the certainty that the efforts will be effective.

The policy provides specific factors under these two basic criteria that will be used to analyze conservation efforts.

## **Who is responsible for managing sage-grouse populations?**

The management of sage-grouse is a shared responsibility. The states, acting through their respective wildlife management agencies, are responsible for managing resident wildlife, such as sage-grouse. Federal land management agencies, such as the BLM and U.S. Forest Service, are responsible for managing habitat on federal public lands under their respective jurisdiction. Similarly, other land owners or administrators manage the lands they own or control, and may or may not have specific responsibilities related to wildlife and wildlife habitat.

Since everyone has a stake in the outcome of sage-grouse conservation efforts, it is in our collective best interest to work together to identify and achieve common goals and objectives. Sage-grouse will take advantage of suitable habitat, regardless of ownership or management responsibility.

### **What is the BLM's legal responsibility for managing sage-grouse habitat?**

The Strategy will list and discuss all existing laws, regulations and policies, and memorandums of understanding/agreement (MOUs or MOAs) pertinent to sage-grouse conservation and BLM management of habitat including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the Endangered Species Act.

### **How will the BLM's management of sage-grouse habitat relate to management, conservation and restoration efforts currently being conducted by other agencies?**

The BLM will work closely with all agencies conducting programs to evaluate, conserve, enhance and improve sage-grouse habitat to ensure a coordinated approach to sage-grouse conservation. Some of these efforts are:

- development of state and local sage-grouse conservation plans being led by state wildlife agencies;
- preparation of a range-wide sage-grouse conservation assessment, a project being led by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and the Conservation Planning Framework Team;
- federal interagency multi-species conservation planning activities;
- the Great Basin Restoration Initiative; and
- the development of broad-scale sagebrush habitat assessment procedures by the BLM, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Geological Survey/Biological Resources Discipline.

### **What laws, policies and plans will the BLM consider during the development of the Strategy?**

The BLM will consider:

- Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing factors;
- US Fish & Wildlife Service's Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE);
- *Guidelines to Manage Sage-grouse Populations and Their Habitats* (Connelly et al. 2000);
- BLM's Strategic Plan;
- Rangeland Health Standards;
- DOI Strategic Plan.

### **What principles will be used to guide development of the Strategy?**

Guiding principles include:

- involved and effective BLM leadership at all levels;
- use of interdisciplinary teams;
- application of the best science available;
- clearly defined, measurable and outcome-based strategies.
- information sharing among all concerned with the Strategy and its implementation



## **How will the BLM involve the general and special-interest public during the development of the Strategy?**

The BLM will employ Secretary of the Interior Norton's "Four Cs" philosophy. BLM staff will **Consult** with local communities and special interest groups on the best way to achieve goals and objectives for the habitat management program and collaborate with those most affected by program decisions, **Cooperate** by forming partnerships with other agencies, tribes and community groups to develop innovative management tools and programs, and **Communicate** planning and implementation intentions and actions to the public, while listening to the public's concerns and ideas regarding the Strategy. Following this philosophy will ensure that the BLM and its partners will achieve **Conservation** of the sage-grouse habitat and encourage growth of sage-grouse populations.

## **How can I participate in developing the Strategy?**

You can review the draft Strategy on the BLM Web site at [www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov) and submit your comments during the public comment period, July 21 through August 20. Attend any listening meetings or briefings that are scheduled in your area.

## **Who are the people developing the Strategy?**

Development of the BLM Strategy is an interdisciplinary effort by natural resource specialists, line managers, planners, senior leadership, and other appropriate personnel. Major resource programs represented include Range Management, Fluid and Solid Minerals, Fire Management, Wildlife, Recreation, Wilderness, and Lands and Realty.

## **Who is leading this effort and who can I contact with questions?**

Ron Wenker, BLM-Colorado State Director, is the senior management representative for the Strategy. Preparation of the Strategy is being coordinated by the BLM Fish, Wildlife and Botany Group. For further information, contact the BLM's National Wildlife Program Leader Cal McCluskey, (208) 373-4042; or Wildlife Specialist Mark Hilliard, (208) 373-4040; or Biologist Julie Moore, (202) 452-7746.

**SUBJECT:****BLM Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy****PURPOSE:**

In December 2002, BLM Director Kathleen Clarke approved a proposal to develop a national BLM Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy to complement state-led sage-grouse conservation planning efforts. The BLM Strategy seeks to ensure long-term conservation of sage-grouse on BLM public land through actions and programs that can contribute to sage-grouse conservation. These strategic actions and programs will be implemented through improved coordination, communications and information sharing, and refinement of BLM policies, procedures, and decision-making involving sage-grouse and their habitats. The national Strategy, to be finalized by September 30, 2003, will facilitate development of BLM state-level strategies to be completed by September 30, 2004.

**ISSUE:**

Declining sage-grouse populations and widespread loss and degradation of sagebrush habitats have prompted multiple petitions to protect sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Approximately half of all remaining sage-grouse habitat occurs on BLM public land. The BLM recognizes these lands have a major role to play in conserving sage-grouse and is committed to managing them to ensure the future well-being of sage-grouse and many other declining sagebrush-dependent species.

**MESSAGE:**

Under guidance of the Assistant Director for Renewable Resources and Planning, the BLM is preparing a national Strategy that describes actions it will take to conserve sage-grouse and their habitats on BLM public land. The non-regulatory Strategy will complement state-led sage-grouse conservation planning efforts. The draft BLM Strategy will be released for internal review in mid July 2003 and external review July 21, 2003. It will be finalized by September 30, 2003, and consist of a first-tier of national level actions necessary to support the development of the second-tier to implement BLM state-level strategies.

The BLM state-level strategies will be developed following issuance of the national Strategy and are to be finalized by September 30, 2004. Like the national Strategy, the BLM state-level strategies will be prepared by interdisciplinary teams and entail consideration of stakeholder and other interests. Ongoing participation by the BLM in state-led sage-grouse conservation planning activities will ensure that BLM state-level strategies complement state efforts.

An interdisciplinary BLM team has evaluated activities either conducted or authorized by BLM that can adversely affect sage-grouse and their habitats. The team also developed initial recommendations for actions the BLM can take to help sustain sage-grouse on BLM-managed public land. These recommendations include improved program and land management coordination, communications and information sharing, development of analytical tools, and refinement of policies, procedures, and decision-making involving sage-grouse and sage-grouse habitats. The Strategy will be implemented through the BLM planning process. Any action subject to NEPA requirements will be analyzed in conformance with NEPA provisions.

**CONTACTS:**

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